Working With Musicians

Rick Mohr, August 2013

In general

- Be respectful and friendly. Having musicians as friends and allies is wonderful!
- I heard a musician say to a caller "I really like working with you. You're relaxed and easygoing, but in control."
- Learn the musicians' names (write them down); use them both in person and on mic
- Listen! Then tell them when it sounds great, and specific things you noticed/liked.

Let them know what kind of music you want for each dance

- If you have a reasonable idea what mix of dancers you'll get, plan a program and give them a written copy with musical suggestions.
- Some callers choose very specific adjectives for every dance. I lean toward being less specific, leaving room for them to pick things they're excited about and vary the mood through the evening.
- I tell them:
  - Smooth or balancey
  - Where the balances are (and perhaps lines f&b, down the center)
  - If I want it longer/shorter or faster/slower than normal
  - What energy level I want
  - Jigs/reels if I care; often I don't. For example, reels for a high-energy kicker; jigs for "Rory O'Mohr" balances.
  - Style of tune if I care; often I don't. e.g. southern tunes for a square.
- Unless you have strong repore with the band, lean to less-specific directions.
- The dance will go best if the band is playing something they're good at and excited about. I tell them in advance "If you're not finding something that matches my description please play something you're excited about instead."

Before the dancers arrive (maybe even days in advance!)

- If you have a program, give a copy to the band
- Get signals straight
  - For endings a "2 more" signal is pretty standard. A few bands prefer "3 more" but some think that's silly. And for some "1 more" is fine while for others it's annoying. Find out what they like.
  - I use the "wiggly telephone" signal to mean "It would be a good idea to switch tunes pretty soon."
- Find out how many tunes per medley they like to play. Because 3-tune medleys are sometimes too long for me I may tell them it would be great to have the option of some 2-tune medleys.

After the walkthrough

- Make sure you know how many tunes they're going to play. I usually just turn around and ask "How many tunes?"
- If the tempos they've been picking aren't working for your dances, show them the tempo you want. But with experienced musicians it's best to do this sparingly.

During the dance

- Changing tempos
  - Speeding up is easy but slowing down is often impossible once they get going.
  - If it's significantly too fast I immediately turn and say loudly "Slower!" It has to be clear and direct—things are too loud and imminent for niceties. Hopefully this is rare.
  - If it's significantly too slow I might likewise say "Faster!" or I might wait until I have time to go over and say "Can we go faster the next time through?"
  - For me 120 beats per minute is an upper limit. If the music feels too fast I compare it to the second hand on my watch.
- Is it time to switch tunes?
  - Ideally you know how many tunes in the medley (because you asked) and which one they're on (by listening). But sometimes you won't. So just ask a yes/no question, e.g. "Is there another tune?"
  - Some bands like you to tell them when to switch; others have lots they want to do with a tune.
  - As a musician I loved it when the caller would step over and say e.g. "We're about halfway through." (during a 2-tune medley). So if the band can hear me on stage I try to do it that way.
  - I also use the "wiggly telephone" signal.

Ending the dance

- Balance the needs of the dancers and musicians.
- Watch their nonverbal cues—are they really into it, neutral, or maybe dieing and sending you desperate looks.
- I try to make sure they get to play the last tune of a medley at least 4 times.
- Don't end the dance with a couple waiting out at the top.
  - If there's a couple waiting out, 1 or 3 more times.
  - If there's no couple waiting out, 2 or 4 more times.
- Give the "2 more" signal at the beginning of B2 (and make sure they see it).
- If you've just given the "2 more" signal and they quickly switch tunes, consider changing to "3 more" or greater the next time through.

After each dance

- If you haven't written out a program, let them exhale a few times and then tell them ASAP what you want for the next dance.

Sound

- Remember to thank the sound person, on mic
- On nights you aren't calling, help with sound setup/takedown so you become more familiar with the equipment
- You can ask for a caller's monitor (but don't expect one)
- Your ears are valuable. Once the dance is going, walk out into the hall—listen carefully for each instrument in turn and compare its level to the others.
- Remember to thank the sound person, on mic!

Isn't it great to have musicians as friends and allies?

Exercise—Interview Musician(s)

Set up a time before tomorrow's class to talk with at least one musician, with the goal of learning specific things callers do that they like and don't like. I've spoken with the musicians that are here this week and they're expecting to have conversations with you. It's fine to be persistent and creative in your questions. Write down what they say and we'll discuss at tomorrow's class.

(1) Things callers do that the musician likes. You might ask "What's something you remember a caller doing that you really liked?" Or "What do you most appreciate about your favorite callers to work with?"

(2) Things callers do that the musician doesn't like. You might ask "What's something you remember a caller doing that you really disliked?" Or "What are some of the most annoying things that callers do?"